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ABSTRACT

Characteristics in the college academic setting and the external environment that affect the decision-making structure and that the dean should consider before reorganization are examined. Concepts and theories about governance, decision-making, organizational structure, and characteristics of effective decision makers are also briefly reviewed. A number of variables in the academic environment are related to the decision process, including faculty heterogeneity, departmentalization, the climate of the organization, and specific characteristics of the university. Approaches that have been used to incorporate information about a changing external environment into the decision process include environmental scanning, multiple scenario analysis, and issues management. A new model for decision-making that focuses on learning must be considered for the 1980s and 1990s. This model would help interpret issues of resources in terms of their impact on learning; ensure that performance, learning outcomes, and teaching improvements would receive greater attention than process measures; emphasize the special values, patterns, and attitudes of education; and recognize the relationship of the institution to its environment. (SW)

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The Decision-Making Structure and The Dean

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The organizational structure of an academic unit provides the framework for decision making and formal communication, and one of the tasks of the dean is to define that structure. Changes in an organizational structure frequently are precipitated by specific events — perhaps the appointment of a dean, a mandate from central administration, the initiation of new majors, recommendations for accreditation, or unrest in the faculty or student body. Increasingly, events outside the university — a cut in state funding, for example — may require that the organization change to survive. Although the dean is responsible for designing the organizational structure, faculty should participate in the discussion of alternatives for the organizational design and be invited to make suggestions.

The problem under investigation is the identification of characteristics in the academic setting and the external environment that affect the decision-making structure and that the dean should consider before reorganization. But before examining these characteristics, a brief review of concepts and theories about governance, decision making, and organizational structure is called for.

Decision Making and Related Concepts

Governance, decision making, and organizational structure are major concepts in university administration. Governance,

defined broadly, includes formal decision arrangements by which the university carries out its work, informal procedures by which standards are maintained, and external forces that shape educational policies (Carnegie Foundation 1982). Early theorists limited their definitions of governance to structure and decision making but recently the definition has been expanded to include concepts of leadership and management as well. The decision-making process has been viewed as basic to the development of policies, programs, and procedures, while leadership and management serves as vehicles to legitimize and execute the decisions (Millett 1979). The dean, as chief executive officer of the college, is responsible for achieving policy and program decisions regardless of the decision-making structure (Wilson and McLaughlin 1984). Department chairs and senior faculty, who share responsibility for implementing policy decisions related to planning, control systems, and the management of financial, human, and information resources, can be helpful in solving problems that develop in these areas.

The importance of the decision-making process in all activities of the organization, not just in the formulation of policy, was recognized early (Simon 1957). Simon defined the process as the choice or selection of an alternative, even though the selection was not always a conscious, deliberate, and rational act. He also viewed decision making as compromise, as the selection was limited to the best alternative available under the circumstances.

Increasingly, the phrase "decision science" is used to encompass decision-

making models, data bases, and related technology. The use of computers in decision making appears to decrease the need for individual participation in the process, however, and administrators must not lose sight of accepting personal responsibility for decisions even though data are manipulated by machine (Massey 1981). Both computers and personal responsibility are important to consider when constructing an organizational decision framework. Although the analysis and manipulation of data can be carried out more effectively with new technology, individuals in the organization continue to be responsible for making specific decisions, for defining criteria for collecting data, and for determining what findings will be implemented.

Organizational structure refers to a relatively fixed set of relationships that exist among positions in an organization (Gibson, Ivancevich, and Donnelly 1982). These relationships serve to accomplish the mission and goals of the organization but also to facilitate communication, specify rules and procedures, and provide for division of work. Decisions about organizational design have focused generally on issues of span of control, departmentalization, division of labor, and delegation. Increasingly, questions rise about the effect of technology and information processing on decision making and about the impact of the external environment on the organization and its decision structure (Gibson, Ivancevich, and Donnelly 1982).

Although higher education institutions have been characterized as organized anarchies or loosely coupled systems,

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modeled after the contingency or garbage can theory (Lutz 1982), such normative descriptions offer little direction to the dean who is attempting to design a decision structure for the academic unit based on a theoretical framework. Similarities in the normative models help account for some of the organizational behavior in educational institutions. All the models permit considerable flexibility in behavior, enabling subsystems to adapt more readily to changes and to survive. This flexibility in the structure encourages communication, participation, and the achievement of goals without jeopardizing academic freedom and the educational culture. Unfortunately, the same flexibility prevents the larger organization from meeting some of the challenges of the eighties—declining enrollment, tenure saturation, and lack of financial support. When the decision structure is being redesigned, flexibility must be decreased to enable the university to meet these challenges. At the same time, the freedom of faculty to pursue the traditional missions of the university must be maintained.

In contingency theory, organizational variables are viewed in complex interrelationships with each other and with the environment (Peterson 1984). While the organizational or decision-making structure is most effective when it is designed in terms of the missions and functions of the academic unit (Young 1980), contingency theorists recommend fine-tuning the structure based on changes in the external educational environment. The administrator who is alert to environmental changes is able to adjust the internal structure accordingly.

At a 1983 conference on academic renewal, a call was sounded for rethinking the basis of the organizational model used in higher education, especially when dealing with declining resources (Peterson 1984). Colleges and universities should be viewed as "learning organizations" rather than as variants of the bureaucratic model; perhaps shifting the emphasis from characteristics of student and faculty to students' learning outcomes and teaching improvements would enable administrators to place more attention on the learning mission during reductions of resources (Peterson 1984). Such a change would emphasize students and their education, and the idea of a learning rather than a bureaucratic environment. This view is supported by proposals that students be considered before departmental needs when faculty appointments are made (Sanford 1977) and that administrators and faculty give renewed attention to educational philosophy (Bowen 1982). While no one recommends total

revolution in higher education, many urge a new interpretation of the educational mission to bring it more in line with the purpose of the college or university. The current interest in reemphasizing liberal education in the baccalaureate curriculum also supports this shift.

A rational university structure is possible to design by following an orderly sequence—for example, determine the mission and purpose of the organization; translate specific goals into operational goals; identify positions, administrative units, communication channels, and lines of authority; and assign individuals to the positions (Young 1980). Converting the mission to operational goals and subsequently well-defined behaviors will reinforce the structure, but ultimately, it is the formal policies translated into structure that influence organizational effectiveness. Before making any structural changes, certain questions must be answered (Wilson 1972): What is the locus of decision making? What are the sources of dissatisfaction with the current practice? What are the proposed changes, and what are their feasibility, desirability, and implications? Using Young's prescription and Wilson's examination may assist in translating theory into workable structure, although they fail to account for specific institutional characteristics, the contemporary higher education environment, and changes anticipated in the larger environment.

The use of theory to guide decision making may be most effective when various models are identified and selected for their consistency with the characteristics of the specific decision requirements. Seeking to find one model that will suffice for tasks as varied as appointing faculty, advising students, purchasing computers, and awarding scholarships and little chance for success (Bolman and Deal 1984; Nutt 1976). And before choosing or designing a model, the dean would benefit from studying elements that affect the school and its decision making.

Characteristics of the Dean

Although leadership style is mentioned repeatedly in the literature, minimal empirical evidence is available to support the notion that a relationship exists between style and effective decision making. One effort to link administrative style of university presidents to educational outcomes yielded a typology of styles (bureaucratic, intellectual, egalitarian, and counselor) and related them to faculty and student satisfaction (Astin and Scherrei 1980). A distinct feature of that study was the identification of presidential patterns of communication

with members of the academic community, including students. Faculty and students were more satisfied in their roles under egalitarian and counselor presidential types whose operating styles were personal, informal, and open to a wide range of constituencies. In contrast, presidents with bureaucratic styles operated primarily through vice presidents and staff, and other administrators and faculty viewed them as remote, inefficient, and ineffective. While intellectual presidential types supported research and scholarly pursuits, faculty turnover was higher in those settings. Student outcomes related to satisfaction were similar to those of faculty; that is, administration was perceived as being uninterested in students' needs, and students were dissatisfied with administrative services and procedures. Students learned to manage time and study efficiently in colleges with presidents who exhibited an intellectual style but otherwise showed few positive outcomes. If the role of the dean is similar to a mini-president, as some researchers suggest, similar investigation and analysis could focus on the deanship (Dill 1980; Karol and Ginsburg 1980). Currently, such evidence is absent, and knowledge about the dean's role is broad and generally based on conjecture.

A recent discussion of effective academic administrators highlights deans who are experts at managing coalitions as well as aggressive opportunists at preserving their place in the institution (Whetten 1984). Deans, functioning as coalition builders, act as catalysts within groups to foster respect and encourage solidarity and commitment. One concept views leadership as centered in coalitions with the consent and approval of an inner circle, and in complex organizations, such as universities, "judgmental decision strategy is required and control is vested in a dominant coalition" (Thompson 1967, p. 143). Deans who subscribe to Whetten's ideas about managing coalitions and Thompson's structuring of coalitions for the decision process are recognized by their peers as superb politicians. Such deans administer their schools as political systems, effectively using both negotiation and bargaining.

As opportunists, effective deans create a climate for risk taking that encourages innovation and creativity even in times of retrenchment. This style of leadership attracts and retains productive faculty. Furthermore, the academic leader of this dimension personifies an institutional image that is consistent with the values and priorities of academe. Deans who are opportunists communicate openly with multiple constituencies in times of crisis and change, even though the time to do so

competes with decision-making time. When working with groups, effective deans view administration as a process (Walker 1979), seek consultation and advice in an atmosphere of collegial decision-making, and assist groups to come to an acceptable decision (Eble 1981).

The most prevalent approach for examining academic leadership style has been the commentaries by deans and others who have an interest in academic administration. Interest in deaning is recent and limited primarily to descriptive studies about deans from professional schools. These studies identify demographic data and broad role-related behaviors, and they advocate certain leadership qualities that characterize the dean's performance (Abramson and Moss 1977; Arends, Reinhard, and Sivage 1981; Cyphert and Zimpher 1980; Dejonizka 1978; Gandy, Randolph, and Raymond 1979; George and Deets 1983; Johnson 1983; Wilson and McLaughlin 1984). Records of experienced deans also support the notion of leadership qualities that are important in effectively filling the role as decision makers (AACN 1981; Dill 1980).

Deans' roles span boundaries, and they are expected to provide strong leadership and establish valid decision structures that can contend with uncertainty about goals. Institutions that are searching for deans are frequently unclear about the objectives of the organization as well as the important attributes necessary for the decision maker. Academic institutions, unlike business and service organizations, are characterized as having multiple missions and unclear and ambiguous goals. This enduring state of vagueness is reflected in the inability of search committees to identify significant qualities and characteristics that applicants should possess to achieve the school's goals and objectives. Some of the difficulties lie in the different perceptions of what deans and faculty should be strong about (Wilson and McLaughlin 1984).

Search committee chairs and deans who were appointed to schools of education were surveyed about criteria for success in the dean's position (Heald 1982). Although the sample was small, the findings identified differences between selection criteria considered important by the search chairs, those that deans saw as important for functioning, and the published criteria of the institution. Criteria related to planning and evaluation skills and to scholarship generated the most differences. Deans who dealt with realities of the position placed less importance on scholarship and more on skills of planning and evaluation. These findings, which were related to education deans, were similar to those found

in a study of nursing deans (George and Deets 1983).

The little that is known about deans' educational and experimental backgrounds about decision making is found in the literature about the professions, particularly education, law, medicine, nursing, and social work. Deans of medicine (Wilson and McLaughlin 1984) and law (Abramson and Moss 1977) generally hold professional doctorates in their disciplines, with the number of deans with professional doctorates from education (Cyphert and Zimpher 1980), social work (Gandy, Randolph, and Raymond 1979), and nursing (George and Deets 1983; Johnson 1983) following respectively. The majority of deans, except those from nursing, reported significant administrative experience before their appointments. Few deans had planned career paths leading to their positions, although deans of medicine generally had progressed up the academic administrative ladder. The relationship between these findings about professional deans, while interesting, provide little basis to assess the ability to design an effective decision structure.

Characteristics of the Academic Environment

A number of variables in the academic environment are related to the decision process, including faculty heterogeneity, departmentalization, the climate of the organization, and distinguishing characteristics of the university.

Faculty participate in institutional decision making on a structural level (Millett 1979; Schuh 1975; Wilson and McLaughlin 1984), but the extent to which they do varies among institutions (Baldridge et al. 1978; Blau 1973; Conway and Andruskiw 1983). Decision-making structures and processes in colleges and universities differ based on the relative heterogeneity and autonomy of the subunits (Ryan 1980). Heterogeneity refers to the separation of academic specialties into departments or other designated units and the preoccupation of faculty to establish their disciplinary culture (Thompson 1967). Increased specialization within the department leads to a more autonomous state and may affect both structure and procedures for decision making in the institution. Faculty enjoy considerable autonomy as subject matter experts, as researchers with external funding, and as members of a tenure system, an institutional form of autonomy (Ryan 1980). Control, coordination, and evaluation of academic work takes place through standards imposed by disciplinary associations. Deans can lessen the impact of hetero-

geneity and autonomy to some extent by manipulating structural elements to influence patterns among the subunits and by exerting formal authority to maintain stability (Ryan 1980). When responsibility is centralized in the dean's office, departmental faculty measure their success in achieving objectives by the amount of status and influence they exert in the institution. On the other hand, when decentralization of responsibility is evident, departments, through committee interaction, attempt to shape group norms and form political alliances.

An examination of the characteristics of the college or university will reveal tendencies toward centralization and decentralization, the general reputational standing compared to other departments and schools in the discipline, the quality and quantity of research and publications by faculty, and the ease of recruiting qualified and renowned faculty. The effect of the organization on faculty recruitment, on the climate, and on students' performance has been examined, but unfortunately the effect of these attributes on the organizational structure has not. Nevertheless, these attributes are important considerations for the dean to explore during the designing of the unit's decision structure (Blau 1973).

The usual organizational response to increased complexity, diminished resources, and survival of programs is the centralization of decision making. Unfortunately, centralization further restricts deans and faculty from confronting the very problems that must be resolved. The relationship between decentralization and the adoption of innovations was found to vary depending on the origination of the innovation (Daft and Becker 1978). Decentralization offered no advantages to innovations implemented from the top down, although it was important for innovations originating at lower levels. Perhaps decentralization forced faculty to talk to each other and to think about problems and their solutions rather than just reporting the problems to superiors (Daft and Becker 1978).

The academic department, the major organizing unit of higher education, stimulates specialization and parochialism, influences academic offerings and faculty appointments, and produces research breakthroughs and scholarly works (Sanford 1977). The departmental boundaries of traditional disciplines tend to decentralize decision making at the same time they limit imaginative solutions and creativity in devising alternative decision-making structures (Glicksman 1984; Young 1980). On the other hand, faculty in newer subject matter areas, seeking to share the power and prestige of the departmental-

ized disciplines, tend to emulate their traditional structure. Although higher education generally supports the use of the departmental framework, fresh patterns and new habits of thinking are being encouraged (Elmore 1977; Sanford 1977).

Within a discipline or profession, an accepted subject matter framework might dictate the design of new academic units. In addition, the age of the school, its reputation in the discipline, and its relationship to other schools and colleges in the university affect the structure that the dean and faculty will consider and accept. The dean who observes the success of other schools in the university will benefit from studying their organizational patterns. For example, a competitive program that fares well in student and faculty recruitment and obtains large sums of research money as well as a significant share of the institutional budget will be a model to consider.

The climate of the organization results from the interaction between the formal structure, and the practices and character of the individuals in the organization (Nash 1983). Organizational climates that stress achievement, motivation, involvement, and a sense of individual responsibility stimulate organizational commitment, productivity, and job satisfaction. Before instituting changes in the decision structure, the dean might analyze the climate by use of a questionnaire, such as the one devised by the Hay Group (Nash 1983, p. 69). The analysis yields eight dimensions, one of which is decision-making structure, and provides useful data for managing the climate. The dean must be aware, however, that while it is possible to make changes in the climate, they are not achieved quickly or easily (Nash 1983).

Although other attributes might relate to decision making, the ones discussed here appear to be most relevant for most disciplines.

Characteristics of the External Environment

The external environment is increasingly important to the activities that occur in the school or college and to the overall survival or health of the institution or program. The sooner the dean can identify impending external changes and take action, the more effectively the problem can be resolved. Because the future is unpredictable, uncertain, and uncontrollable for the most part, three approaches have been used for incorporating information about the external environment into the decision process (Heydinger 1984): environmental scanning, multiple scenario analysis, and issues management. All three approaches are

familiar mechanisms to educators and administrators, although not necessarily in a reorganizational sense. Environmental scanning, a broad survey of potential trends and developments, and multiple scenario analysis, construction of a set of plausible futures to deal with identified trends, are especially useful in anticipating the types of problems and how they might be confronted. Using these two approaches interrelatedly helps reveal external changes that might otherwise be ignored. Building a continuum of scenarios based on the trends and issues identified in scanning helps identify possible responses and provides a firmer base for the decision-making framework. Issues management, which is taking a proactive stance rather than the traditional reactive stance, is especially helpful for the dean and faculty when facing declining and uncertain resources.

Summary and Conclusions

The decision-making framework of a school or college as it is designed by the dean and supported by the faculty must relate to the mission and goals of the academic unit. Traditional characteristics, such as the dean's leadership style, institutional centralization, the departmental structure, and the organizational climate continue to be important to assess. Some aspects are important, although their impact has changed. For example, students' involvement in decision making, which was viewed as critical in the 1960s, has shifted. Now students exert influence about faculty, curricula, and resources through the marketplace rather than within the decision structure (Bowen 1982).

The dean must recognize his or her responsibility to define the decision structure for the academic unit. Being well acquainted with the concepts of governance, decision making, and centralization as well as the implementation of these concepts in a specific setting is critical for fulfilling this responsibility. The amount of decentralize decision making will depend not only on the university setting but also on the qualifications and experience of the faculty, the need for innovation, the availability of resources, and the effectiveness of the dean in delegation.

A variety of tools are available for assessing the needs of the academic unit, including questionnaires (Nash 1983), environmental scanning, multiple scenario analysis, and issues management (Heydinger 1984). Encouraging faculty to participate in the assessment and to share responsibility for discussing alternatives will enable the dean to determine the likelihood

of the faculty's acceptance of the new structure. Some deans will depend on a more prescriptive approach, moving from organizational purpose to goals, functions, positions, administrative units, communication channels, lines of authority, and finally placing individuals in the positions (Young 1980). The leadership of the dean, the strength of the faculty, the academic ability of students, and other characteristics play important parts in the effectiveness.

The decision structure of the academic unit in the 1980s and 1990s must be able to react swiftly. Deans who recognize the interrelatedness of university, government, and society will be prepared for changes in resources, the job market, mission, and societal needs. A new model for decision making that focuses on learning must be considered. This model would help interpret issues of resources in terms of their impact on learning; ensure that performance, learning outcomes, and teaching improvements would receive greater attention than process measures; emphasize the special values, patterns, and attitudes of education; and recognize the relationship of the institution to its environment as a critical part of the design of the decision-making structure. The dean who designs this framework not only must be assured that the process is structured appropriately and carried out effectively but also that the decisions being generated will advance the missions of the school.

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